

Pronunciation Guide

Introduction

You've no doubt decided it's time to get a little help with pronunciation – and with songs that weave in and out of six unfamiliar languages it's no wonder. These pronunciation rules are most appropriate for the *Eve*, *Fɔ̃*, *Gũ* and *Yevegbe* languages (most of the songs in this book), but you can use them for the other languages as well with acceptable results. I deliberately avoid any mention of pitch, which plays an essential role in some of these languages, because it's a very complex and unfamiliar subject which I think would confuse rather than enlighten readers. For the purpose of singing, it is reasonable to rely on the melodic line of each song to provide the rudiments of correct pitch.

If you're wondering why one guide can serve for so many languages, the answer is simple. Written language was introduced in West Africa by European missionaries within the last few hundred years. They naturally tried to combine all necessary “unfamiliar” sounds into one extended and very Greek-looking alphabet, rather than create an alphabet for every language.

Alphabet

a b d ḍ e ε f f̣ g h ɣ x i k l m n ŋ o ɔ p r s t u v ṿ w y z
A B D Ḍ E Ẹ F F̣ G H ɣ X I K L M N Ŋ O Ọ P R S T U V Ṿ W Y Z
ã ê ạ̃ ạ̣̃ ạ̣̣̃ ạ̣̣̣̃ ạ̣̣̣̣̃ ạ̣̣̣̣̣̃ ạ̣̣̣̣̣̣̃

Quick Summary

If you like, you can get by with just a few simple rules. Since most African languages are written phonetically, try to pronounce all the vowels and consonants that are written. *gb* and *kp* are single consonants, so pronounce the two sounds at the same time. Pronounce *v* and *f* like *v* and *f*, but use both lips together instead of top teeth against bottom lip. Pronounce *ŋ* like *ng*. As for the vowels, you can pronounce *a* as in *pot*, *e* and *ε* as in *weigh*, *i* as in *beat*, *o* as in *boat*, *ɔ* as in *bought*, and *u* as in *boot*. The vowels *ã*, *ê*, *ạ̃*, *ạ̣̃*, *ạ̣̣̃*, *ạ̣̣̣̃*, *ạ̣̣̣̣̃*, *ạ̣̣̣̣̣̃* are nasalized (say them as though you were pinching your nose).

That should be enough to get you started. It's actually easier than English once you get the hang of it. The following sections provide a much more detailed pronunciation guide for those who wish to go further.

Consonants¹

b, g, v, f, m, n

For all practical purposes, these consonants are pronounced the same as corresponding sounds in English.

d

Similar to the corresponding consonant in English, but pronounced with the tip of the tongue against the back of the teeth and not against the ridge behind the teeth.

ɖ

Made with the tip of the tongue against the front of the hard palate. Technically: a voiced retroflex stop.

p, t, k

Similar to the corresponding English consonants, but with less aspiration (puff of breath). *t*, like *d*, is pronounced with the tip of the tongue against the back of the teeth.

gb, kp

Pronounced with simultaneous closure at the lips (as for *b* or *p*) and at the soft palate (as for *g* or *k*). Released simultaneously and without aspiration. Technically: labiovelar stops, voiced and voiceless respectively.

dz, ts

Usually similar to the final consonant clusters in English *cads* and *cats* respectively, but pronounced with the tongue against the back of the teeth. Before *i*, and sometimes before other vowels, similar to the consonants in English *Joe* and *chew* respectively.

ɸ, f

In pronouncing *ɸ* and *f*, the air passes through a narrow opening left between the lips (rather than between the lower lip and the upper teeth as in *v* and *f*). Technically: bilabial fricatives, voiced and voiceless respectively.

z, s

Similar to the corresponding sounds in English, but slightly palatalized (i.e., somewhat closer to the medial consonant sounds in English *pleasure* and *pressure* respectively) before *i*.

¹ The remainder of this chapter is a detailed summary of pronunciation rules reprinted with permission from *Ewe Basic Course* by Irene Warburton, Prosper Kpotufe, and Roland Glover (Indiana University, African Studies Program, 1968).

ɣ, x

In pronouncing *ɣ* and *x*, the air passes through a narrow passage formed by raising the back of the tongue towards the soft palate. Technically: velar fricatives, voiced and voiceless respectively.

h

Similar to *ɣ*, but produced somewhat further back in the mouth. Technically: a voiced pharyngeal fricative.

ny

Similar to French *gn* as in *Boulogne*. Technically: a palatal nasal.

ŋ

Similar to English *ng* as in *sting*. Technically: a velar nasal.

l

Similar to the first *l* in English *little*. The tongue is raised and flat, not retracted as in the second *l* in *little*.

r

In producing *r*, the air passes through a narrow passage formed by raising the tip of the tongue towards the ridge behind the teeth. Technically: a voiced alveolar fricative.

w, y

Similar to the corresponding sounds in English, but often weakened to the point of disappearing completely between vowels.

Vowels

a

Similar to the vowel in American English *pot*. Technically: a low central unrounded vowel.

e

Between the vowel in English *bet* and the final vowel in English *sofa*. Technically: a centralized mid front unrounded vowel.

ɛ

Between the vowel in English *bet* and that of English *bat*, but much closer to the former. Technically: a lower mid front unrounded vowel.

i

Similar to the vowel in English *beat*, but unglided. Technically: a high front unrounded vowel.

o

Similar to the vowel in English *boat*, but unglided. Technically: a higher mid back rounded vowel.

ɔ

Similar to the vowel in English *bought*, but unglided. Technically: a lower mid back rounded vowel.

u

Similar to the vowel in English *boot*, but unglided. Technically: a high back rounded vowel.

ã, õ, ĩ, ã, õ, ã, ã

All of the above vowels have a nasalized counterpart.